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AUTHOR Clark, Lisa K.
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ABSTRACT

A review of research on dropouts from adult basic education (ABE) reveals several theoretical models relevant to the study of dropout and persistence in ABE, shows specific variables related to dropout behavior, provides insights as to who drops out and why, identifies some characteristics of disadvantaged adult learners, and reveals some problems with existing ABE programs. However, a great deal of research on dropouts and persistence in ABE has focused on classifying who is dropout prone, particularly in terms of sociodemographic attributes, but has failed to probe the reasons why learners drop out or to address how dropout can be prevented. The tendency to minimize the significance of situational variables and to view them as simply beyond the control of ABE programs seems to reflect the belief that high dropout rates must stem from the failure of students rather than weaknesses in program structure or services. Very little research has attempted to illuminate the relationship between instructional strategies and dropout/persistence in ABE. For the most part, research on dropout and persistence in ABE has attempted to examine specific variables in isolation, often ignoring the interaction of a given factor with other related factors. Finally, it appears that conclusions about dropout behavior are usually based on the opinions of teachers and administrators but rarely consider the perspectives of ABE students. (KC)

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DROPOUT AND PERSISTENCE IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Dropout and persistence in Adult Basic Education are issues of critical importance to program administrators, instructors, and most importantly, the adults who decide to become involved in and hope to gain something from ABE programs.

Efforts to conduct research on dropout and persistence have been partly hampered by a lack of consensus as to what is meant by the term "dropout". This lack of agreement about who exactly is a dropout is "an important shortcoming, because an educational problem, in many cases, is first of all a matter of definition" (Seaman, 1971, p. 1).

As Seaman explains, in one program a student may be classified as a dropout if she or he misses a certain number of class sessions, whereas in another program the same student would not be considered a dropout until the end of the term or cycle of instruction. Usually dropout refers to a student who discontinues participation (active involvement), and fails to complete a selected educational activity; this is usually signified by the student's failure to participate in an evaluation exercise given at the end of the course of instruction.

Transferring to another program can cause further

confusion, for in doing so a student may be considered a drop-out from the first program, and a new student in the second program - neither classification being entirely accurate.

Nonetheless, there does seem to be a general agreement that dropping out implies a student's failure to continue attendance throughout the prescribed time limit or duration of a selected course of study, or simply leaving the course before completing it and before achieving a level of competence associated with its completion.

Conversely, the term persistence is generally understood to imply continued active participation in an education activity. Although persistence and retention are complementary in meaning, there is an important distinction between these two terms. According to the dictionary, persist means "to hold firmly and steadfastly to some purpose or undertaking despite obstacles" (Davies, 1970, p. 528). In referring to persistence then, the emphasis is upon the behavior of the learners, implying their perseverance and sustained involvement in a program (with completion an expected outcome.)

Retention refers to the holding power of the educational program or sponsoring institution or agency; emphasis in using this term is upon the program's role in affecting the behavior of the participants.

Discrepancies in defining dropout, failure to define the term within the context of specific research efforts, and inadequate, incomplete attendance records are factors that

have contributed to the difficulty of systematically examining and clarifying the dropout problem. Consequently data on ABE dropout rates are not plentiful. However, that which is available indicates that dropout rates are typically high.

For example, one of the most frequently cited studies was conducted by Kent (1973); in his nationwide longitudinal survey of 2,300 ABE students, there was a dropout rate of approximately 60 percent during a six month period. Additionally, in perhaps the most extensive study of ABE practices in this country, conducted by Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox (1975), 40 percent of the 1,135 urban ABE teachers surveyed estimated that 10 - 24 percent of their students dropped out by the sixth week of class. Another 17 percent of the teachers reported the dropout rates in thier classes during the first five weeks as in the 25 - 49 percent range (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 68). And as the researchers point out, since students continue to drop out after the first weeks of class, these estimates fall short of reflecting total attrition.

In 1981 Boraks reported that a statewide survey of students enrolled in ABE programs in Virginia revealed that 39 percent of the students dropped out before the 19th hour of instruction. The dropout rate increased to 60 percent by the 39th hour of instruction, and to 90 percent by the 99th hour of instruction (Boraks, 1981, pp. 5-6). These figures translate into minimal gains in learning for most students. As

Boraks explains, "The average ABE student, then, is exposed to less instruction in an ABE setting than a grade school child who has been in school for one month" (Boraks, 1981, p. 7).

Unlike other areas of adult education where "positive dropout" commonly occurs (adults stop attending a course of study because they feel that their particular learning objectives have been met), dropout in ABE usually signifies that the learning needs and objectives of the student have not been met. It represents the loss of an expected "return" on time and energy spent in pursuit of knowledge and skills that are not simply being sought to engage in a hobby or satisfy an interest, but which are crucial to daily existence. As Darkenwald points out, "When adults drop out from educational activities aimed at acquiring proficiencies in important roles such as worker, parent, spouse, or community leader, the cost of failure to acquire these proficiencies can extend beyond the individual to the faily, community, an organization, or society in general (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 2).

High dropout from ABE programs may also be viewed as an indication of failure on the part of instructors; in fact in the eyes of many administrators, ". . . the most salient index of teaching performance is holding power" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 71). Total enrollment and dropout rate were also rated by the 100 ABE directors surveyed by Mezirow et al. as the two most important criteria in judging the success of

their programs (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 104).

Ultimately then, dropout can be considered an indication of the failure of the school or agency to provide effective services. And "in the enrollment-driven economy that characterizes much of adult education, a high dropout rate can threaten not only individual jobs and feelings of efficacy but an agency's very existence as well" (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 2).

Certainly there is a need to develop increased understanding of the dropout problem in ABE. Such an effort entails an examination of who drops out (as well as who persists) and why, and what can be done to prevent dropout or encourage persistence. An understanding of the factors relating to these behaviors is crucial to the formulation of effective strategies for enabling individuals to realize their fullest potential as learners, and improving the ability of ABE programs to meet the educational aspirations of the populations they serve.

The purpose of this paper is to:

- Present several theoretical models relevant to the study of dropout and persistence in ABE.
- Review existing research on dropout and persistence in ABE, which examines specific variables related to these behaviors and provides insights as to who drops out and why.
- Explore some of the prevalent assumptions about educationally disadvantaged adults and their learning needs which are reflected in the research and related literature, and

which significantly influence ABE practices.

- Examine common problems with existing ABE programs. Discuss implications drawn from the research and related literature for improving practices and programs. (Included in this discussion will be information on innovative approaches which have improved persistence and enhanced program effectiveness.)
- Analyze some of the problems with existing research and identify future research needs.

THEORETICAL MODELS

In order to understand the status of existing theoretical foundations for the study of dropout and persistence in adult education, it is helpful to consider the conclusions of those who have engaged in research and theory formation in this area.

There seems to be agreement among researchers that theory with predictive and explanatory validity relevant to the study of dropout/persistence is limited and inadequate. According to Anderson and Darkenwald (1979, p. 2), "most of the many 'dropout' studies have been descriptive, methodologically weak, and based on small, unrepresentative samples." These researchers stress the need for research that will contribute to developing or testing a more adequate conceptual framework for studying persistence.

According to Boshier, "The absence of testable theory has crippled adult education participation and dropout research for decades" (Boshier, 1973, p. 255). Boshier contends that both participation and dropout research has been characterized by single variable studies which "have generally failed to explain or predict what is a multi-variate phenomenon (Boshier, 1973, p. 255).

Boshier's work provides one of the few useful conceptual frameworks for exploring the existing research and explaining dropout behavior. According to this theorist, both participation

and dropout stem from the interaction of internal psychological and external environmental variables.

In Boshier's model, the adult participant is viewed as a unified system concerned with maintaining inner harmony, and harmony with the environment. The concept of congruence refers to this state of harmony or accord. Incongruence or discrepancies may develop within the individual (intra-self), or between the individual and the environment (self/other). While congruence produces satisfaction, incongruence causes anxiety and acts to deter participation. "Both adult education participation and dropout can be understood to occur as a function of the magnitude of the discrepancy between the participant's self concept and key aspects (largely people) of the educational environment" (Boshier, 1973, p. 260).

Boshier's theoretical orientation provides a helpful perspective for reviewing other research on this topic in several ways:

1. It is important to recognize dropout and persistence as multivariate phenomena, as Boshier emphasizes.
2. Researchers employ different classification schemes in thier identification of variables associated with dropout/persistence. However, most of these variables may be viewed as either internal psychological or external environmental (situational), as Boshier has categorized them.
3. Boshier's theoretical stance is that the reasons for participation and dropout do not reside exclusively within the

learner. This in turn suggests that there are ways the educational environment can be altered so as to have a positive impact upon dropout and persistence - an assumption underlying the conduct of this review of the literature.

Another valuable model for explaining persistence and dropout in adult education was developed by the Swedish educators Rubenson and Hogheim. Their model is based upon the principles of Vroom's expectancy or path-goal model of motivation. According to expectancy theory, which attempts to explain motivation to work, motivational level and thus performance depends upon three factors: the individual's personal objectives, the perceived probability of performing successfully with effort, and the perceived probability of satisfying personal objectives with successful performance (Hicks and Gullett, 1981, p. 457). In other words, people will be motivated and productive when they expect to be able to perform effectively, and perceive that doing so will be profitable in terms of accomplishing personal goals - or when the expected outcome has a high valence or value for the individual.

Rubenson and Hogheim contend that this same model of motivation serves to explain why adults persist or drop out of educational activities. According to these researchers, motivation to persist is based upon the expectation of personal success in the activity (or the extent to which learners believe themselves capable of coping with and completing a course), as well

as valence - the perceived affect of participating in the activity (which may be positive, indifferent, negative or mixed.) Valence refers to the extent that learners believe that being successful in the activity will have positive consequences in terms of satisfying personal needs and objectives.

The strength of the resultant force or interaction of expectancy and valence for individual learners determines if they will complete or drop an activity.

So, if ABE learners expect to be able to participate successfully in a literacy program, and if they believe that doing so will be beneficial to them in important ways, they can be expected to persist. Conversely, if learners doubt their ability to perform successfully and/or perceive the outcomes for doing so as primarily negative or unimportant, then dropout is predicted.

According to expectancy-valence theory, in some situations, expectations of being able to succeed might be high, but a negative valence is associated with the outcomes of participation. Rubenson emphasizes the influence of membership groups in shaping the attitudes of learners. When reference groups or family members view participation in an educational activity as having a negative value or negative consequences, then the valence for the potential learner may become negative, and persistence will be unlikely.

It is also possible that learners might regard an activity as very valuable (valence is high), but if they lack

confidence in their ability to perform successfully, or expect other difficulties (expectancy is low), dropout is likely to occur.

The major emphasis in this model is upon how individual learners perceive themselves, their environments, and what they expect to gain by participating in a learning endeavor. As Cross points out, "Rubenson's paradigm places much less emphasis on so-called external barriers to participation than current research investigations do . . . Motivation, according to Rubenson, is based on the 'perceived' situation, which may or may not be the 'real' situation" (Cross, 1981, pp. 117-119).

A weakness of this model is that it seems to view the determinants of participation, persistence and dropout as existing primarily within the individual, and it fails to take into account significant, real barriers to persistence which are external to the learner.

However the model provides a useful theoretical construct for analyzing the motivational forces underlying these behaviors, and it is crucial that educators be aware of these forces. The relevance of this model will be evident as the following discussion of variables (especially psychological) relating to dropout and persistence unfolds.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

The following is an overview and discussion of some of the existing research studies and selected literature dealing with dropout and persistence in ABE, and ABE practices in general. The studies reviewed here utilized samples of ABE (and/or other adult education) participants involved in organized learning activities, primarily offered through formal education agencies in the United States and Canada. An attempt was made to identify studies and other publications that focus on ABE specifically as much as possible.

Findings from the research and literature indicate that a multiplicity of variables influence dropout and persistence in ABE. They may be viewed as individual attribute variables, situational variables, and program context variables, which include those involved in the teaching-learning process. Some of the most significant variables in each of these categories will be explored in this paper.

Those that may be considered attributes of the individual include both sociodemographic and psychological factors. Sociodemographic variables include: age, race, sex, educational attainment, employment status and marital status.

Psychological variables include: intelligence, aspects of personality, locus of control, self confidence, motivation for learning, expectations of the learning experience in relation to actual outcomes, and satisfaction.

Situational variables include: moving away, work and family responsibilities (which can cause time/energy conflicts), mobility, availability of child care, health, and weather.

Program context variables include: class location(s), class size; number, frequency and length of class sessions, and provision of support services.

Teaching-learning variables include: qualifications, personal characteristics and attitudes of the instructor; instructional methods and techniques; course content and relevancy, and harmony between program and learner goals.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

The bulk of experimental research on dropout and persistence in ABE has focused at least in part on sociodemographic variables such as: age, race, sex, educational attainment, employment status, and marital status. The purpose of these studies has been primarily to identify who drops out (and who persists) in adult literacy programs. Sociodemographic data is commonly collected from questionnaires (Anderson and Darkenwald, 1979), or through the examination of existing student records (Richardson, 1978).

In 1964 Verner and Davis conducted a review of thirty previous studies that had been done between 1928 - 1963 on completion and dropout in adult education. Over half of the studies involved adults attending evening elementary or high school programs. The results of these studies provided some evidence that older adults were more likely to persist, that there seemed to be no difference in persistence due to sex, that those with higher levels of education tended to persist longer, and that those coming from the lowest socioeconomic groups were less likely to persist. There was also some indication that those with stable employment were more likely to persist, and that Blacks in all-Black settings were more likely to persist than those in integrated classes. There was disagreement with respect to the relationship between marital status and persistence.

The researchers concluded that while all of these variables appeared to be related to persistence, in no case were the findings "sufficiently acute to clarify the nature and extent of the relationship" (Verner and Davis, 1964, p. 172).

In a more recent review of the adult education dropout research (again, not specifically pertaining to, but inclusive of ABE), Irish also concluded that the relationship of sociodemographic factors to dropout were inconclusive (Irish, 1978, as cited by Darkenwald, 1981, pp. 3-4).

Richardson (1978) identified age, sex, employment, and marital status as possible predictors of success in adult literacy programs. Analysis of data collected on 107 adult students over a period of two years, indicated no significance for any correlations, and it was concluded that the results indicated "that the identified factors are not the most important criteria for predicting program success in adult reading programs"(Richardson, 1981, p. 6).

This researcher went on to suggest that since adult beginning readers possess varied levels of reading ability, motivation, and personal goals for reading success, collecting quantitative data concerning vital statistics may not provide a great deal of insight. Richardson also recognized the significance of the hidden variable of attitude, and states that interviews seem to be the best method for determining individual attitudes and motivations. She concludes, "Although time consuming, interviews in conjunction with

collection of statistical data may provide greater insights for predicting program success (Richardson, 1978, p. 7).

Using a sample of 9,173 participants in adult education nationwide, Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) analyzed the sociodemographic determinants of participation, satisfaction and persistence. The findings of this study are particularly noteworthy because: it is the most comprehensive of its kind to date, it included a separate analysis of data for various populations, (including participants in ABE and high school completion programs), and because the researchers used of multivariate data analysis techniques which controlled for misleading results.

For ABE participants, findings indicated that those with more schooling are much more likely than those with less schooling to persist, that older adults are slightly less likely to drop out, and that Blacks were somewhat more likely to drop out. It was found that sex has no effect one way of the other. These conclusions were consistent with those drawn for the entire sample. Other sociodemographic factors were not found to have any bearing upon persistence for the ABE population, except that residence in the west had a moderate negative impact (Darkenwald, 1979, p. 30).

Research indicates that age, race, and educational attainment do serve as predictors of dropout and persistence behaviors in ABE.

There are a few practical implications to be drawn from

sociodemographic findings. As Darkenwald points out, these findings can sensitize instructors and administrators to the propensity of particular groups to be at risk of dropping out, and this propensity is most pronounced in ABE and high school completion programs (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 4).

Another implication stems from knowledge of the effect of the educational attainment variable. It is known that years of formal schooling represents the strongest predictor of continued participation in adult education, due to the fact that involvement in educational activities encourages the development of learning skills, as well as positive attitudes toward learning which have a positive effect upon success in learning, and in turn persistence. Recognizing that ABE students with low levels of educational attainment are especially apt to drop out in part because they have not developed some of the necessary skills, more emphasis should be placed upon helping ABE students not only to learn prescribed content, but to develop more effective listening, thinking, studying, and in some cases test-taking skills.

For the most part however, the usefulness of sociodemographic predictors of dropout or persistence is limited. By concentrating on these factors, researchers have suggested that the dropout prone (and persisters) may be characterized by specific, concrete, isolatable attributes; the designation of which then implies that the reasons for dropout reside with learners; that the problem stems primarily from them.

Sociodemographic research has usually failed to take into account the wide array of other alterable variables external to the learners that influence their behaviors. And while these studies have succeeded in classifying who is most likely to drop out, they have not provided a great deal of insight as to why dropout occurs, or how it can be prevented.

Sociodemographic information does offer potential for improving retention and enhancing program effectiveness in another way. It is often useful to become aware of the sociodemographic composition of those involved in an ABE program, as well as that of the local population in general. Such information can aid program administrators in discovering if those in need of services are being reached and retained, and if the various target groups are involved in a program in appropriate proportions.

Often the number of adults representing a certain segment of the population is skewed in relation to the percentage of the larger population they compose. For example, if the local population being served is 65 percent Native American, but only 10 percent of program participants are Native American, it is apparent that stronger efforts need to be made to attract these adults to the program, and to encourage persistence among those who do enroll.

It should be noted that while the utility of sociodemographic data pertaining to an immediate area can be significant,

it dissipates considerably as geographic area becomes larger.

PSYCHOLOGICAL VARIABLES

Psychological variables constitute a broad and varied category, which includes what may be considered "relatively enduring individual characteristics such as intelligence and personality" (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 4); as well as more changeable traits of the learner including: locus of control, self confidence and expectation of success, motivation for learning, expectations of the learning experience in relation to actual outcomes, and closely linked to the latter, satisfaction with the learning experience. A number of these variables are closely liked to/influenced by program context factors which will be discussed later.

Research examining the relationship between psychological factors and dropout or persistence in ABE has been limited. This is in part due to the difficulty of adequately assessing with quantitative methods mental orientations, which are difficult to isolate, fluxuating and dynamic. Therefore, in order to formulate an understanding of how psychological factors influence dropout/persistence, it is important to look elsewhere in the literature, to ethnographic studies, to gain further information and insights on this complex arena of interracting variables.

During the conduct of this review of research, no studies probing the relationship of intelligence to dropout or persistence in ABE were located. However, in the broader realm

of research on adult education participation, the findings which have used related measures - of academic aptitude or general ability have suggested that "where ability is closely linked to performance or success in an adult education course or program it is also likely to be linked to persistence" (Darkenwald, 1981, pp. 4-5).

Ability is an important factor affecting the rate of progress of learners in an ABE program, where success is generally associated with the acquisition of specific academic skills, and is certainly one determinant of the feasibility of learners achieving particular goals, such as reaching an eighth grade functional level or earning a high school equivalency certificate. Some goals may not be attainable given the innate ability of a student, while other less formal but equally valid goals will be less dependent upon intellect.

Unfortunately, as Mezirow et al. point out, "because teachers attend to the middle range of students . . . attrition in attendance of slower and more advanced students results. Teachers should draw from each other's experience in making a collective effort to best resolve this problem. In single-class sites heterogeneity makes individualization of instruction essential" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 150).

It is important for teachers to recognize the strengths of each individual learner, and to nurture and focus upon these abilities as much as possible. Each person should be

helped to maximize whatever potential she or he has. For those with limited ability, attainable goals should be formulated, and small increments of progress celebrated.

Gearing the program to address individual learning interests, providing truly individualized instruction, and recognizing various kinds and levels of learning goals can help accomodate differences in intelligence which are sure to exist in every group of learners.

Only a few attempts have been made to explore the relationship of certain aspects of personality to dropout or persistence in ABE. Most of these studies have been conducted by doctoral students with findings reported in Ph.D. dissertations not readily accessible to other researchers. Darkenwald has reviewed several such studies, which involved students in high school completion programs.

He reports that one study conducted by Killian (1969) found that those who dropped out had lower scores than persisters on the "personal Adjustment" and "Social Adjustment" scales of the California Test of Personality (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 5).

Scharles (1966) used the Edwards Personal Preference Scale, and found that male persisters had a higher need for affiliation and a lower need for autonomy than did male dropouts. Female persisters had a higher need for abasement and a lower need for achievement than did female droputs.

"For this population, then, dropouts were more self - directed and achievement - oriented than persisters" (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 5). However, in research conducted by Kratz (1980) on 10 adult literacy programs, no significant relationship between the mean preference for self - directed learning in a program and the dropout rate was found. (Kratz, 1980, p. 5).

Wilson (1977) administered The Adjective Check List, by Gough, to 142 students enrolling in a high school completion program, to determine whether those who dropped out before either completing 10 weeks of instruction or passing the GED exams, would describe themselves differently than those who completed one of these goals.

According to the profiles yielded by this instrument, those who dropped out described themselves as more: hostile, impulsive, rebellious, irresponsible, headstrong, impatient, comfortable with disorder and change, and desirous of attention and authority than did persisters. Dropouts further described themselves as less: socialized, less able to give prolonged effort, less willing to subordinate themselves, indifferent to the feelings and needs of others, assertive, and in need of more assistance than those who persisted (Wilson, 1977, p. 11).

Persisters described themselves as more: obliging, tactful, diligent, practical, persevering, supportive, compliant, able to yield to reasonable requests of others, concerned about the needs of others, and interested in stability; but

less interested in taking risks than dropouts (Wilson, 1977, p.11).

Another psychological variable that has been studied in relation to dropout and persistence behaviors in ABE is locus of control. According to Rotter (1954), people vary in the degree to which they recognize a contingent relationship between their own actions and the resulting outcomes. Some people (externals) generally believe that outside forces (such as fate, chance, or luck) control their situations; whereas others (internals) tend to believe that their own behaviors are the primary factors controlling outcomes - in other words, that control rests with the individual. Locus of control refers to the degree to which one is internally or externally oriented.

The relationship between locus of control and participation/completion in ABE/GED programs was investigated by Newsom and Foxworth in a 1978 study involving a sample of 553 adults enrolled in ABE/GED classes throughout Texas. On the basis of locus of control theory, these researchers suggested that internals would perceive programs as a means to control, affect, and shape their futures, and therefore would enroll and complete in greater percentages than would externals, who perceive that they have little potential control over their lives. Thus, it was hypothesized that significantly more internals than externals would achieve personal and/or program goals. Completions were defined as those who either continued

to attend throughout the five month period during which data was collected, achieved personal goals such as achieving an eighth grade functional level, or were recommended by their instructors to take the GED exams. Dropouts were identified as those who left the program for any reason without achieving any of those goals. The Rotter I-E Scale was used to measure locus of control during the first week of classes.

Findings indicated that both internality and frequency of completions tended to increase with age, and that there was a positive relationship between internality and number of grades completed in school. A disproportionate number of Blacks were externals, and a smaller percentage of Black externals and internals completed than the percentages completing for other ethnic groups. Statistical analysis revealed no significant relationship between completions and locus of control in general, contrary to the research hypothesis. While the percentage of externals who dropped out was higher than the percentage of internals who dropped, a higher percentage of externals also completed.

The most meaningful conclusion then that could be drawn from the research data was "that in terms of improving retention rate in ABE/GED classes, a critical group needing attention are those who are 21 years old or younger, those who have completed six or less grades in school; and those clients who are Black (Newsom and Foxworth, 1980, p. 48). These findings tend to corroborate the conclusions of

sociodemographic studies, and serve to remind ABE program administrators and instructors of who will be most apt to drop out.

Another investigation of locus of control and course completion of ABE participants was conducted by Taylor (1984). 62 adults enrolled in an ABE literacy program in Ontario comprised the research subjects. During the first two weeks of the program, a modification of Valecha's abbreviated 11-item Rotter I-E Scale was administered to learners to measure locus of control. Program duration was five months (the same as in Newsom and Foxworth's study). As hypothesized, adult learners who completed the program were significantly more internally controlled than those learners who did not complete the program (Taylor, 1984, pp. 115-117).

Since some of the research results have suggested that there is a positive relationship between internality and persistence in ABE, and in light of the sense of powerlessness, lack of control, fear of manipulation and dependence upon others often felt by those lacking literacy skills (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, pp. 5-6), the concept of locus of control is one that is relevant to the study of dropout/persistence in ABE programs, and one that warrants further research.

Another study conducted by Newsom and Foxworth attempted to discover if specific teaching strategies would have an impact on:shifting the locus of control of ABE/GED students toward internality, completion rate, and increasing knowledge

of math skills over a three month period. 92 ABE students were assigned to three learning groups: experimental classes using learning contracts (which required students to set their own learning goals, identify the means of achieving their goals, and evaluate the results), experimental classes having teachers trained in Rotter's concepts of locus of control and social learning theory, and classes conducted normally, serving as a comparison group.

The resulting data indicated that simply training teachers in Rotter's concepts with implications for teaching, had no impact on developing internality among students.

In the group utilizing learning contracts, it was observed that internals reacted favorably to the use of the contracts, while externals often resisted the procedures dictated by this approach. But the results supported the proposition that contract learning may have an internalizing effect on adults.

In essence, this approach required the teacher to individualize instruction, so the researchers were left questioning whether the internalizing effect on students in these classes was due to the contract procedure, or the teacher behavior, or both. Newsom and Foxworth concluded, "If indeed the results were due to the teachers' instructional techniques, then the contract learning method might be viewed as an effective means of ensuring individualization and promoting an internal locus of control among students" (Newsom

and Foxworth, 1980, p. 3).

The study did not provide evidence of a statistically significant relationship between locus of control and completion rate however.

It was the contention of these researchers that an early assessment of internality/externality of adult students can be helpful in alerting teachers to the instructional and personal needs of their students and thus be valuable for enhancing success in, and preventing dropout from educational programs.

While the scores of assessments like the Adult Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Scale (ANS-IE) should not be relied upon too heavily for predicting success or diagnosing the abilities of students, determining locus of control does provide information that is insightful in terms of understanding learning styles and the attitudes that underly those preferences. As such, these instruments seem to offer promise in terms of helping ABE instructors better understand their students, and encouraging persistence.

The significance of <u>self confidence</u> as a psychological variable related to dropout and persistence in ABE cannot be overemphasized. While no scientific studies have attempted to illuminate the connection between level of self confidence and persistence in ABE, research and theory have emphasized the integral role that self perceptions play in motivation

to learn and success in learning.

Adults' beliefs about their ability to learn to a large extent have been shaped by their past experiences in school. Many individuals seeking literacy skills have previously experienced failure in formal educational settings, which in turn has led to a diminished degree of confidence in themselves as learners. Believing they are dumb and that they cannot do it, constitutes a major, mind - blocking impediment for many illiterate adults.

Because they failed to learn to read and write while in school, illiterates become painfully aware that others regard them as "dummys," amd as automatically incompetent or deficient in all other areas as well. As Eberle and Robinson point out, "The power of these myths lies partly in the fact that many illiterates themselves accept them as true and act on them. This in turn defines their expectations for themselves and limits their capacity to make a change" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 3).

All too commonly what results may be seen as illustrative of the high valence/low expectancy scenario described as a possible explanation for dropout in Rubenson's expectancy - valence model. While adults may perceive the acquision of literacy skills as highly valuable, they may lack any confidence in, or expectation of being able to succeed in the learning activity.

Due to lack of satisfying learning experiences earlier

in life, illiterate individuals often lack any identifiable experience that creates the expectation of success in learning, or of success leading to tangible benefits in their lives. "Compounding this problem is the tendency of the majority of illiterate adults to equate the kind of learning they envision doing if they decide to try to become literate, with school" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 20). Although they have all successfully learned many other living skills in nonacademic ways, they do not associate these kinds of learning with "education", and therefore the learning successes they have had do not serve to bolster their confidence or affirm positive expectations of learning efforts.

Despite the pervasive effects of previous failures, lack of confidence and low expectations of success, research and practice have reflected a surprisingly low level of emphasis on examining, explaining, and counteracting the impact of these variables. One of the few illuminating discussions of these areas is presented in The Adult Illiterate Speaks Out: Personal Perspectives on Learning to Read and Write, (Eberle and Robinson, 1980). Because this publication includes the thoughts of ABE learners, presented in their own words, it is especially helpful for developing insights into the feelings of learners.

It is crucial that ABE program administrators and instructors develop an understanding of these issues and help learners deal with the diminished self esteem and self

confidence caused by early experiences of failure. Instructors can help students become aware of the many informal learning achievements relating to their roles as parents, consumers, homemakers or workers, which all students have made in their lives. Doing so can help foster learners' perception of themselves as having been learners all along, and of having been successful as learners.

Taking the time to get to know students and talk with them about their past experiences can be therapeutic for learners and provide valuable insights for instructors. "A learning environment that supports . . . an adult student will affirm every moment of success for every learner and celebrate it until the learner takes up the celebration him/herself" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 32).

Helping learners to set attainable yet rewarding short-term goals, acknowledging small increments of progress, and remaining supportive and encouraging will help learners to develop confidence, and "the tutor's loyalty to and confidence in the student can go a long way toward helping him or her through periods of discouragement" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 32).

The areas of motivation for learning, reasons for participation and persistence in adult education activities are cognate, and research and theory pertaining to these topics is closely interrelated. Studies on motivation for learning

illuminate the reasons for participation and the factors that seem to account for persistence; participation research sheds light on nonparticipation and dropout. All such studies draw heavily upon an extensive body of research from different fields, especially motivational psychology.

A review of the research on adult motivation for learning is beyond the scope or intent of this paper. However, some especially relevant theoretical models representing attempts to explain participation, persistence and dropout in adult education, as a function of motivational forces, were presented earlier in this paper. These models provide valuable conceptual frameworks for developing a general understanding of these behaviors.

Beyond this, it is also important for ABE program administrators and instructors to be aware of the specific reasons or motivations for learning which are common to ABE students. These reasons have been presented in numerous publications and have not been found to be contradictory from one source to another.

Not surprisingly, motivation for the majority of adults stems from their perception that learning literacy skills will be directly applicable to practical problem solving in their everyday lives.

> "Evidence suggests that the visible pay off - and that not too distant - is of tremendous importance to adults' decisions to begin and sustain learning activities. Promises of remote rewards are simply insufficient for many; too many other demands are crowding in on their time, energy, and attention" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 23).

The belief that adults are most motivated to learn that which has immediate practical value has been emphasized by many in the field, perhaps most notably Knowles, who contends,

> "that, as a person matures . . . his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness" (Knowles, 1970, p. 39).

According to Mezirow et al., "Individual motivations and corresponding goals fall into two basic categories: those that relate directly to adult work life and those that relate to family and community life or individual growth" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 40).

Most frequently adults cite the following reasons for becoming involved in ABE programs: desire to become employed or be eligible for better jobs, (this is often closely linked to the attainment of a high school equivalency certificate); desire to obtain a driver's license; desire to read and write letters; desire to help children in school (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 23; Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 40). In Kent's 1972 nationwide survey, two-thirds of the adults in literacy programs cited self-improvement as their major reason for attending (Kent, 1972, p. 6).

It is clear that motivation for learning is not sparked by the same interests and needs for all ABE students. Yet ABE programs often operate as though they are. All students are engaged in the same curriculum and follow basically the

same learning agenda (even if at their own pace), and very little consideration is given to what motivated the individual to become involved in the program in the first place, or what activities would keep the student motivated and thereby encourage persistence. Students typically have little say in the learning agenda, and are given little opportunity to select materials or activities that would be appropriate to their strongest areas of interest.

Because every ABE student has different motivations for wanting to learn, and will be motivated by different interests and types of activities, it is important for program staff to allow students to follow an agenda that builds upon and is appropriate to these motivations. Basically, this type of program reflects a learner - directed, rather than the conventional teacher - directed curriculum. It represents the view that learners are capable of identifying their needs and should play an active role in determining how those needs can be addressed.

Expectations of the learning experience in relation to actual outcomes, and learner satisfaction are other factors that scientific research has failed to examine in relation to dropout/persistence behaviors. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that the degree of congruence between what learners expect to gain and the actual outcomes of their participation are both positively related to persistence;

and that discrepancies, in turn can cause lack of satisfaction, which in turn may cause dropout. According to Darkenwald, "Course satisfaction is the best single predictor of dropout from adult education" (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 8). These conclusions may be seen as supportive of Boshier's explanation of dropout as a function of incongruence between the individual and elements of the educational environment.

Discrepancies between learner expectations and outcomes can take several forms. Such discrepancies at times result from a conflict between learner interests and program emphasis, or as a result of the learner expecting a rate of progress that is unrealistic or impossible. As Eberle and Robinson state, "A genuine hazard to the learning process is students' hope or expectation that progress will be steady and miraculous and that they will be readers by a week from Thursday" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 32).

According to Mezirow et al.,

> "Initially most (ABE students) have unrealistic timetables..... It is common for adults entering with fourth or fifth grade reading skills to anticipate passing the GED exam within a year. After a few weeks in the program, perhaps after the first or second class meeting, the student is forced to revise his timetable radically. Many become discouraged at this point and drop out" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 51).

As these authors and others have pointed out, it is difficult for ABE instructors and tutors to help learners set up realistic expectations, and yet not discourage them. Students need to be oriented so they know these skills cannot be

learned overnight, and be helped to set realistic and specific goals so they will know success when they experience it.

Mezirow et al. explain that it is difficult for ABE students to know how well they are doing and how far they have progressed in relation to their goals. According to these authors, the "locating process" is especially difficult in ABE because the time necessary to achieve one's objectives is not easily determined, and due to a lack of clear academic benchmarks permitting an accurage assessment of progress. "Direct academic benchmarks, such as promotion to a higher level, achievement test scores, or an assessment by a teacher or a counselor, do provide the locating information that participants want, but are rare in ABE" (Mezirow et al, 1975, p. 53).

To eliminate discrepancies between learner expectations and actual outcomes of participation, and to mitigate the drop-out that can occur as a result of these discrepancies, the following recommendations are made:

1. Learner interests and needs should dictate program emphasis as much as possible, so that individualized instructional plans are followed rather than a standard curriculum for everyone.
2. Learners need to be oriented at an appropriate point near the beginning of their involvement in an educational program. They need to be helped to formulate realistic but meaningful objectives. Doing so can help prevent

discouragement and dissatisfaction, and prevent discrepancies between the learners' expected rate of progress and actual rate of progress.

3. Learners should be assisted in setting specific short-term goals that they can realistically attain.
4. Learners need to be helped to recognize their gains and progress toward achieving learning goals - through the provision of easily recognizable traditional types of academic benchmarks, or by designating other less formal, personally meaningful benchmarks signifying progress in learning (e.g. succeeding in reading a story to one's children, reading a magazine article, completing one's driver's license test or a job application.)

These measures offer possibilities for promoting consistency between what learners expect and what they get - and for enhancing students' satisfaction with the learning experience.

SITUATIONAL VARIABLES

A multiplicity of factors that may be considered situational have been identified as relevant to dropout and persistence behaviors in ABE.

> "Situational variables are those that characterize or affect an individual's social-environmental situation at a given point in time. They are external in the sense that they are not directly related to individual characteristics or to the teaching-learning process" (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 5).

Examples of situational variables that can inhibit persistence are: moving away, work and family responsibilities that cause time/energy conflicts, transportation problems, lack of child care, poor health, and bad weather. Darkenwald makes a useful distinction between two categories of situational variables - impersonal situational variables such as those mentioned above, and social-interpersonal factors, such as encouragement from spouse, children, and peer or reference groups (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 13).

When asked why so many ABE students drop out, 58 percent of the 1,135 ABE teachers surveyed by Mezirow et al. ranked learners' work schedules as the most important factor. 15 percent cited child care as the single most important reason for dropout, and 10 percent said moving away. Based on these perceptions, Mezirow et al. conclude, "In short, the work and family responsibilities of adults affect not only regularity of attendance, but also sticking with the program once enrolled" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 69).

Situational variables are also the most frequently stated reasons for dropping out given by ABE students themselves. The single most often cited reason is conflict between work and class hours, followed by child care, health, family problems, and moving (Cramer, 1982, p. 15).

According to Darkenwald,

> "Reactional studies - those that query dropouts concerning their reasons for dropping out - generally conclude that these (situational) factors are of great significance. In a typical reactional study of 306 dropouts from an ABE program, it was reported that the two major reasons for discontinuing attendance were change of residence and interference with work activities" (Moss and Richardson, 1967, as cited by Darkenwald, 1981, p. 5).

Change of residence is a variable beyond the control of administrators and instructors. And to a large degree, so too are time conflicts arising from the work and family obligations and problems of learners, which can inhibit persistence in a multitude of ways.

Such barriers will be most pronounced for adults attempting to participate in programs offering a limited class schedule, or with strict attendance requirements. The impact of conflicts between learners' participation in a program and other demands on their time, at least for some, can be alleviated through alternative approaches to offering educational services. In addition to regularly scheduled classes which will be impossible for some to attend, facilities and learning materials can be made available on a more flexible basis through the use of learning centers or learning labs, open

on an extended basis. Learning labs offer an increased degree of access to learning materials and tutoring, and allow students to come at times that fit their schedules.

The use of home tutors, who can be scheduled to work with learners at times that are convenient, also offers excellent potential for minimizing the impact of time conflicts upon persistence.

According to the literature, lack of child care is not regarded as one of the foremost inhibitors to persistence, however it does constitute a significant barrier to participation and persistence for some ABE students, especially young, unemployed mothers who are the primary (and sometimes only) caregivers for their children, and who often lack the financial resources to pay for the frequent babysitting necessary in order for them to attend classes regularly. "Faced with a choice of leaving children alone or staying at home with them, the parent is more likely to leave the ABE program and hope that eventually the program will be changed in some way so that she can return to further her education" (Seaman, 1971, pp. 4-5).

While ABE programs typically lack the facilities, staff and funding to provide day care services for all of their students, several possibilities for alleviating the problem of child care exist. Flexible scheduling of learning sessions, either through the availability of a learning lab or the offering of both day and evening classes, will make it more

likely that those who share parenting responsibilities will be able to attend at a time when their partners are available to care for the children.

Home tutoring enables parents to remain with their children. However, depending on the ages and behavior of the children, the demands of caring for them may be prohibitive to engaging in a learning session, or make it difficult for the adult to concentrate.

One solution to the day care dilemma would be for students and program staff to establish cooperative child care arrangements between students. With the home tutoring approach this type of plan would be especially feasible, since learners would be meeting with their tutors according to various schedules. Pairs of learners could agree to watch each other's children for several hours each week, while the other was working with a tutor.

Seaman proposes an innovative approach to ABE that would involve all family members, thereby eliminating the problem of child care. He suggests that programs be implemented in accordance with the concept of "family education." Seaman believes that such efforts could be a great thrust toward breaking the "cycle of illiteracy" that seems to exist within our society.

> "Because children's early environment is so critical to their subsequent behaviors and attitudes, going to school with their parents may have a great impact upon the value they learn to place upon education in early life. If these values are retained, . . . (these)

children might be prevented from becoming dropouts in the future" (Seaman, 1971, p. 7).

Poor health constitutes a more common situational barrier to persistence for older adults than it does for younger learners. Health problems are much more likely to cause dropout for the old as they tend to be more afflicted with chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, heart trouble and arthritis. Declining perceptual capabilities and physical disabilities also trouble older people and may hamper their continued involvement in an ABE program.

There are many ways that instructional approaches and learning environments can be modified to better accomodate learners with perceptual or physical handicaps. Teachers can make it easier for older learners to understand them by speaking in louder (and lower, if possible) tones, by speaking directly to learners (so they can see lip movements), and by using gestures to emphasize meaning. To help compensate for visual impairments, instructors can use visual aids with large sized print and good color contrast, and make sure that facilities are well lit. Elevators and wheelchair ramps should be available in all buildings used.

There are a wide range of such measures which can be employed to minimize discouragement and frustration, and encourage persistence among disabled participants. However, it is often impossible to alleviate the barrier to initial involvement created by health problems.

Mobility is another situational variable affecting dropout and persistence. In some cases, health problems cause limited mobility. More often however, transportation problems stem from lack of a dependable vehicle (or any vehicle), or the inability to afford taxi or bus fare in urban areas. As Seaman points out, in rural areas transportation is especially problematic, "as the class center is often located many miles away and travel can again become expensive" (Seaman, 1971, p. 4). Although some students attempt to carpool, since many ABE students have access only to older model cars, often in need of repair, the driver's car may break down, and consequently a number of learners will miss class. "After several such experiences, the uncertainty of getting to class may become too great and, as a result, the student may leave the program" (Seaman, 1971, p. 4).

Mobility can also be a factor inhibiting persistence when public transportation in urban areas is considered unsafe. People who experience this fear are leary of traveling to and from activities that are not held near their homes; they may also feel especially susceptible to attack at night, when ABE classes are often held.

Working with a population of ABE students whose residences were scattered throughout a rural area, where roads were poor and where considerable distances separated people from community centers used as class sites, this author found that transportation posed a major deterrant to persistence for many students.

Although transportation is recognized in the literature as a factor affecting continued participation in ABE activities, and while ABE program staff are usually aware of the difficulties some of their students have with transportation, most ABE programs tend to operate in the conventional manner of only offering classes in what is considered to be a central location; transportation problems are regarded as beyond the control of programs, and are not addressed. If students can not get to class, they are just out of luck.

Rather than viewing mobility as solely the problem of the learners, transportation problems need to be the concern of programs as well. There are a number of ways that transportation problems can be minimized or eliminated. While it is rarely within the financial means of an ABE program to provide transportation to and from classes for all students, other programming approaches can help to alleviate problems.

Offering classes in a number of locations throughout the community, conducting armchair classes (where a small group of learners gathers at someone's home), and provision of home tutors can all be effective in reducing transportation difficulties.

Inclement weather is a situational variable which can make it difficult or impossible at times for ABE students to attend learning sessions. During bad weather mobility problems are compounded; together these factors can constitute a significant barrier to continued involvement in a program,

in both urban and rural settings. "In some cases, the ABE attendance is almost seasonal, tending to decrease during cold weather and increase during warmer weather" (Seaman, 1971, p. 4).

Bad weather is, of course, beyond anyone's control. To mitigate the negative effects upon persistence it can have, program staff should make consistent efforts to follow up on students who have discontinued participation due to bad weather, visiting them in person if possible, and encouraging them to resume their learning efforts. Attendance policies should never be so strict as to prohibit learners from resuming their involvement after having dropped out for any reason.

Besides the impersonal situational variables discussed, there are other social-interpersonal factors influencing persistence which may be considered situational, such as the degree of encouragement from family, peers or an employer. As emphasized in Rubenson's expectancy-valence model, membership or reference groups can be very influential in shaping an adult's attitude toward participating or persisting in an educational activity.

The high expectancy/low valence explanation for dropout seems to be supported by or reflected in cases where the decision to become literate is made difficult or impossible for an individual by others, sometimes members of the immediate

family. Not uncommonly

> "this behavior can be the overt aspect of a complex family situation in which it is in someones' vested interest to keep a person illiterate. Often this is related to relational insecurity as to whether, if the illiterate no longer depends on a spouse or parents, (s)he will choose to remain related to the person(s)" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 20).

Other membership groups can serve to discourage adults' involvement in ABE as well, if those associates tend to devalue educational pursuits.

Conversely, as Eberle and Robinson point out, close associates of an illiterate can discourage the decision to participate by too much encouragement.

> "The point between encouragement and pressure is too fine and fluid to be defined . . . The point at which a wife's nagging or an employer's awareness of and sympathy with an employee's need for further education becomes an ultimatum can be determined only by the illiterate's own feelings. Many illiterates, sensitive about their lack of education, may be hasty to view the best - intentioned urging as 'pressure'" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 25).

These authors report that the experience of Literacy Volunteers involved in the Laubach Literacy Initiative, as well as that of Vermont ABE program staff, has been that the degree of success for learners who have taken the initiative and made a free decision to participate in literacy education, is much greater than for learners who are enrolled under duress, real or imagined.

Nonetheless, support and encouragement from close associates can also be a very positive enabling factor in terms of an adult's decision to become involved in or persist in ABE.

By becoming aware of the student's reasons for pursuing literacy skills, and staying closely connected to the learner's own agenda, program staff can encourage persistence even if the learner originally came at someone else's instigation.

The literature contains conflicting views as to the extent to which situational variables affect dropout/persistence in ABE. As Cross points out, situational reasons for not participating (or dropping out) are sometimes cited because they are perceived as more socially acceptable than certain other variables (such as lack of interest in learning or lack of confidence in one's ability to learn (Cross, 1982, pp. 106-107). Indeed adults may be reluctant to reveal their real reasons for quitting, or may not be certain themselves exactly why they failed to persist.

Nevertheless, situational variables do constitute real and pervasive deterrants to persistence that are often ignored by both researchers and educators. Darkenwald contends that external situational variables are best seen as contributing to dropout rather than "causing" it; that these factors interact with others, such as poor teaching, to promote dropout. He goes on to conclude that "situational variables are of limited practical importance because, for the most part, they are beyond the control of teachers and administrators" (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 6).

Certainly there are some situational variables beyond the control of program staff. However, contrary to the stance of Darkenwald and others, situational variables do have great "practical significance," and are obstacles to participation and persistence that can be overcome to some extent through the practices of ABE programs. These factors must be more effectively addressed if the dropout rate of programs is to be improved.

The tendency to minimize the impact of situational variables or to simply write them off as "beyond our control" seems to reflect the common belief that the failure of programs (as reflected in high dropout rates) must stem from the failure of students rather than weaknesses in program structure or services.

It has been the intention of this discussion to illustrate that while some situational deterrants to persistence cannot be resolved by educators, others that are typically viewed as the learners' problems, can be effectively addressed through appropriate programming approaches.

PROGRAM CONTEXT VARIABLES

Program context variables are those that are commonly viewed as within the control of adult educators. They include organizational characteristics of programs, as well as administrative practices and a variety of factors directly related to the teaching - learning process. Organizational factors include: class location(s), class size; number, frequency and length of class sessions, and provision of support services. Teaching - learning factors include: the qualifications, personal characteristics and attitudes of the instructor, instructional methods and techniques, course content and relevancy, and harmony between program and learner goals.

Administrative philosophy and policy influences most of these variables in some way, and should be viewed as integrally linked to program practices.

During the conduct of this review of research, no studies examining the relationship between class location and dropout/persistence behaviors were found, however, the topic has been discussed in much of the related literature. Class location may be seen as closely linked with the general delivery strategy of a program, since the delivery approach in large measure dictates where classes will be held. The selection of class sites is also a reflection of fundamental premises about the roles of programs and participants, and has

a significant effect upon the way learning needs are responded to.

The literature indicates that the most common locations for ABE classes are public school buildings. Over half of the urban ABE directors surveyed by Mezirow et al. (1975, p.124) in their nationwide study indicated that 80 - 90 percent of their ABE classes were held in public school facilities. Some authors feel that the use of such facilities can have a negative effect upon persistence because adult illiterates so often associate these buildings with unpleasant past experiences with learning. As Seaman puts it, "Why do we insist on forcing the ABE students to return to exactly the same environment in which they have already experienced failure?" (Seaman, 1971, p. 6).

Another negative feature of using public schools is that sometimes the furniture used is too small for adults to sit in comfortably, and the juvenile nature of the surroundings may serve to underscore the adults' already acute awareness of the basic level of the material they are learning.

If institutional facilities must be used, a community college or technical school is preferable, as furnishings will be more appropriate for adults and the prestige/pride of attending classes there will be greater than going to classes at an elementary or high school, and may have a positive effect upon persistence.

It is not uncommon for ABE classes to be held in other

public places, such as churches, community centers and union halls, or in storefront locations, banks and private companies. All of these sites offer possibilities for making services convenient for learners, but there is an absence of data to indicate if dropout rates are lower for any of these types of locations.

Mobile learning units, essentially learning centers on wheels, offer a way of bringing ABE classes to where the students are. These units are especially appropriate for use in isolated areas. Mezirow et al. cite the Appalachian ABE Demonstration Center's final report, which presented evidence that a mobile learning center used in Mississippi, which traveled to seven different locations each week, was highly successful in terms of number of learners reached and retention. (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 24).

The armchair method offers another alternative for class locations. Instruction tends to be informal and focuses on the particular interests and needs of the group. This approach offers potential for eliminating situational barriers such as transportation and child care, and provides for a relaxed, comfortable learning environment that is more condusive to learning that many institutional settings.

According to Eberle and Robinson, literacy learning happens most effectively in a comfortable environment where the student has to spend the least energy and anxiety on adjusting to the milieu. For many learners, this would be the home.

When students in several major investigations were asked to name their preferred learning environment, the majority (55 percent) named their homes as the most suitable site; job location was the preference of 19 percent; only 3.5 percent named "school" as a "most suitable place" for undertaking learning activities (Broschart, 1977, p. 16, as cited by Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 35).

The individual in-home tutoring approach has been found to be extremely effective in terms of encouaging participation and persistence in ABE programs, most noteably in Appalachia and Vermont.

From 1965 until 1974, Vermont's statewide ABE program was implemented like most others across the country, offering mostly evening classes held in public school buildings. But by the end of this period enrollments had declined steadily, and it became apparent that changes were needed (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 41).

It was recognized that problems of work, transportation, child care, health, money, energy, fear, communications, and lack of community resources constituted barriers to organized learning activities for many, and that for rural residents these obstacles were compounded by rugged geography and severe weather. Additionally, it was realized that many adults lacking literacy skills could not or would not go to a school or other public place to attend classes, due to physical problems or out of apprehension generated by past failures (Eberle

and Robinson, 1980, p. ix).

As Eberle and Robinson explain,

> "All of these impediments have created what is often perceived to be an 'attendance' problem, the solution to which is better 'recruitment,' i.e., getting people into night classes. Traditional solutions to 'attendance' problems require the student to fit the program . . . and come to a designated place to learn, at designated times. They usually have been designed with the convenience and assumed cost-efficiency of the program in mind" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. x).

Having examined what was keeping people from getting and staying involved in ABE in Vermont, program personnel concluded that more flexible delivery systems were needed, especially those enabling learning to take place in the home. In 1975 the program began moving toward using full time home tutors and large numbers of literacy volunteers, in an attempt to make the program conform to each individual student, and to offer learning opportunities at times and in places comfortable for the student - in small groups, or on a one-to-one basis, in the home or another familiar setting.

In the first two years of providing in-home instruction, enrollment doubled. The number of learners served in their homes steadily increased. In FY 1978, 56 percent of all students were served at home (2,483 more than the total served for the entire FY 1974). In 1979 nearly 5,000 students were served, compared to 1,837 in FY 1973 (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. x; p. 41).

While exact retention figures are not available, it is obvious that the in-home approach to instruction in Vermont

has resulted in dramatic improvements in retaining learners. It is built upon the notion that homes and other nonschool locations are viable places for people to learn.

Size of class is not generally regarded as a variable having significance in terms of its impact upon dropout/persistence in ABE, and has largely been ignored in research. Still it is a factor warranting some consideration. There is some evidence to suggest that there is a correlation between smaller class size and persistence. In Boshier's study of 2,436 participants in noncredit courses, it was found that participants in small classes (less than nine persons) dropped out less than participants in large (greater than nine) classes (Boshier, 1973, p. 266).

It can logically be concluded that in larger classes the amount of time that instructors can spend individualizing instruction and providing individual assistance to learners will tend to be less than if the group is small; and it can be inferred that this in turn can have a negative impact upon persistence.

Small, informal learning groups can also minimize the impact of psychological factors, such as aversion to competition or embarrassment about lack of literacy skills.

The relationship between total number of class sessions and dropout/persistence has been examined in few studies. Findings of research conducted by Darkenwald and Anderson (1979)

indicated that adult education participants are considerably less likely to persist in courses of relatively long duration. This tendency seems to be reflected in ABE settings, where many students realize that it will take an extended period of time to achieve their learning goals, typically requiring many months of class attendance, and where dropout rates tend to be very high.

The number of class (or tutoring) sessions/duration of involvement for ABE learners is determined by their varying needs, and is a variable that is not controllable or even predictable by program staff. However, since it is known that a number of situational and psychosocial variables can create obstacles to adults attending classes, it can be reasoned that duration of program activities might have less of a negative impact if class attendance did not constitute the foremost requirement of involvement. Alternative approaches to delivery of services, as discussed throughout this paper, can ease the burden of pursuing educational goals requiring extended committment.

There is some evidence to suggest that less frequent meetings (once or twice a week) are associated with higher persistence rates (Verner and Davis, 1964, pp. 168-169). Given the multitude of other demands upon their time that adults have, it seems reasonable to conclude that requiring more frequent attendance in learning activities will have a negative impact upon persistence.

As Darkenwald points out, how time is scheduled is probably more important than time per session or even total course time. Length of a class session is probably less important for most adults than the disruption of daily routine caused by frequent meetings. "Thus, less frequent meetings, even if longer in duration, would probably facilitate retention in most adult education programs' (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 6).

Support services is a broad term open to various interpretations. As has been discussed, the instructor or tutor is a crucial provider of support to the ABE learner, especially in terms of providing instructional resources, building self confidence and offering encouragement to the learner. However, support services may also be seen as including other counseling and coordinating services beyond instructors' usual scope of responsibility. While research has neglected to examine the relationship between provision of support services and dropout/persistence in ABE, in light of the special needs of this clientel, it can be reasoned that these services may enhance the ability of programs to increase student satisfaction with the program and encourage persistence.

A number of authors have pointed to the need for better "intake" procedures and student orientation in ABE programs. Counseling services seem to be especially needed in traditionally run classroom oriented programs - to explain the program, accurately assess achievement levels and help students properly

locate themselves in the classes, as well as to provide guidance on vocational matters or accessing community services. Because situational variables often discourage persistence, it is also crucial that support services help learners address these problems. When problem solving skills are an integral part of the curriculum, these concerns will be constantly addressed in learning sessions, and the counselor may simply serve as an additional resource person.

Vocational choices, finding employment, and getting a better job are all important concerns of ABE learners. Mezirow et al. state, "Because a majority come for job-related reasons, a vigorous program of vocational counseling and job placement will significantly increase enrollment and reduce dropouts" (Mezirow et al, 1975, p. 153). This appears to be a valid assumption, since the provision of such services represents an attempt to meet particularly pressing needs of the learners.

Teaching - learning Variables

Teaching - learning variables are those that are most closely associated with the interactions between the instructor and the learner(s). These factors include, but are not restricted to: the qualifications and personal characteristics of the instructor, instructional methods and techniques, and course relevancy.

There is a dearth of research that has specifically addressed how these variables influence dropout and persistence in ABE. However, on the basis of that which exists, and discussions of the teaching - learning process in the literature, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

Views concerning the impact of instructor qualifications upon dropout/persistence conflict. Repeatedly in the literature the view is expressed that the credentials of ABE instructors are not nearly as important as their capacity to care about students. As Fingeret points out, "Adult literacy instructors tend to be chosen for their characteristics as concerned, caring individuals more than for specific instructional skill or training" (Fingeret, 1984, p. 28). However, as Fingeret and others have pointed out, the provision of a warm and caring instructor is not enough to insure that learning will take place or that learners will persist.

A number of research studies have attempted to identify the necessary competencies of adult education instructors, and

adult literacy instructors specifically (see James, 1981, pp. 83-85 for a review of some of the more important and pioneering research on instructor competencies). However, few studies have addressed the relationship between instructor training and actual learning outcomes of students, or the relationship between specific instructor competencies and learning or persistence behaviors.

Because the research base in these areas is so scant, it is risky to conclude, as Darkenwald does, that whether or not a teacher has professional training or employs certain techniques, seems to have little impact on dropout rates (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 7). The significance of ABE instructor qualifications needs to be recognized. Further research is needed to indicate what qualifications and competencies are actually related to successful learning and persistence. And greater emphasis must be placed upon assessing instructor competencies and upon providing appropriate staff development opportunities for ABE personnel.

The assumption here is that ABE instructors become qualified as the result of developing the knowledge, skills and understanding appropriate to being effective in helping others learn, whether through formal credentialing, professional experience or staff development activities.

The needs of adult literacy students dictate that instructors develop certain competencies that are especially important to being effective in helping these learners - for

example, a working knowledge of the complex process of learning to read, as well as facility in diagnosing and remediating the reading disabilities their students may have. Without such competencies, instructors will be hampered in their ability to help students learn, and certainly dropout is more likely to occur when lack of competency causes frustration and lack of progress for learners.

While much has been written about the important characteristics of ABE instructors, and adult educators in general, there is a lack of research to support claims that certain characteristics really make a difference as far as what students learn, or whether or not they persist.

Numerous publications cite what are perceived as the most desirable traits of ABE instructors.

> "They are not autocrats, gatekeepers, disciplinarians, or upholders of externally derived standards. . . Their relationship to the learner is a predominantly helping one and their expertise is more in process than content. They must be able to analyze the articulated goals of learners (what learners want to achieve) and determine what learners need to reach their goals. . . and constantly strive to maintain the morale and perseverance of each person involved" (McCullough, 1981, p. 60).

According to Eberle and Robinson and the learners they cite, tutors must be caring, tough, flexible, patient, accepting and believe in the student's ability. Tutors should be secure enough that they don't need to extract "strokes" from students to maintain their self esteem; be able to accept students' appreciation for help given but not manipulate

students into expressing this gratitude. Also,

> "The tutor must be committed to the student's increased and eventually total independence. . . In our experience the best tutors not only see themselves as learners, but do not see themselves as 'teachers.' People whose sense of identity makes them teachers tend to assume the information-imparting role with adult learners, rather than the partnership that, as soon as possible, relinquishes control of the learning situation to the learner" (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 37).

It is not possible to draw any definitive conclusions about the relationship between specific instructor characteristics and dropout/persistence behaviors in ABE. However, the consensus of many writers in the field, as reflected in the above passages, is that instructors will be most likely to encourage persistence who: are secure personally and view themselves as partners with learners rather than dominant in relation to learners; view becoming literate as a process, rather than simply the absorption of prescribed content; are encouraging; and sensitive to the learners' agendas and flexible and skillful in facilitating those agendas.

The relationship between certain instructional methods and techniques, and dropout/persistence in ABE has largely been ignored by researchers. However, an assessment of traditional ABE instructional practices, as well as some of the less commonly employed options, offers some insights relevant to improving the tendency of learners to persist.

In this discussion the term method will be used to refer to the type of organizational arrangement used for learning purposes - such as classes, small groups, or the one-on-one approach. Technique refers to the specific procedure used to facilitate learning - such as lecturing, drill and recite, independent study, group discussions and individualized instruction. In combination, these procedures may be viewed as forming instructional strategies.

Literature in the field indicates that in ABE, small group meetings or one-on-one instruction in the homes of learners are seldom the primary methods for providing learning opportunities. Most commonly, learners are assembled in classes for learning purposes. Within the framework of class gatherings, small groups may be utilized, and it is not uncommon for instructors to work one-on--one with students; nonetheless, instruction is often geared to the class as a whole.

Classroom techniques also often tend to be geared to the group. In their comprehensive, nationwide study of ABE, Mezirow et al. found that traditional classroom techniques are heavily relied upon in ABE. At both the class and smaller group level, the most common pattern of instruction involves teacher presentation of material or questions, with class drill or answering of questions. According to these researchers:

> "The mode of instruction in many ABE classrooms is that of the elementary school of the 1920's before all those 'progressive' educators began their tinkering. Drill, recitation, group blackboard work, doing assignments in class, using workbooks, and routinization are familiar hallmarks. There is substantial evidence from the field attesting to the remarkable durability and pervasiveness of the present-recite/test-correct approach" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 18).

Underlying the pervasive use of the teacher-directed approach are certain assumptions about ABE learners and the roles of instructors and learners. Learners seem to be viewed as incapable of deciding what they need to know, or how they might go about learning something. Teachers impart the "right" information, determine the sequence of learning activities and what the learning goals of students should be. As such, they retain a position of authority over, rather than partnership with learners.

Within the framework of classes, it is not uncommon for ABE students to engage in learning activities independently, and to be attended to by the teacher individually. Students all follow the same curriculum, but proceed at their own pace. While this is commonly referred to as individualizing instruction, there is an important distinction that must be recognized between individual teaching and actually individualizing instruction.

As James explains,

> "Individualizing instruction is <u>not</u> one learner working alone;. . . it is <u>not</u> a one-to-one relationship; nor is it a particular organizational structure. . . Individualized instruction is a philosophy and a

> process of teaching that provides for learner differences - in ability, learning rates, backgrounds, and goals. It depends on providing alternatives, using individual standards rather than group standards, translating into practice the instructor's philosophy, and employing instructor flexibility" (James, 1981, p. 81).

Eberle and Robinson explain how the concept of individualized instruction is applied in Vermont's ABE program, where participation and persistence have improved dramatically. Tutors in this program do not attempt to place a learner on a theoretical continuum of skills, and advance that person step by step from there. Instead, students identify something they want to learn, and then with their tutors, identify and find materials needed to learn it; when learners hit an obstacle on the way to finding out what they need to know, the tutors help with the missing skill. New learning tasks point to new skills needed (Eberle and Robinson, 1980, p. 29).

If persistence in ABE programs is to be improved, the concept of individualizing instruction must be better understood and embraced by ABE administrators and instructors.

There are other practices associated with ABE classroom instruction that are problematic. As noted earlier in this paper, in the discussion of intelligence as it relates to persistence (see pp. 20-22), ABE instructors tend to teach to a middle range of students, which puts more advanced and slower learners at a disadvantage, and may cause dropout for some. Mezirow et al. point out that "the universal practice

of permitting whomever shows up to enroll at any time can result in continuing setbacks to classroom learning" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 53). When instruction is geared to class groups, rather than individuals, this constant influx of students requires that lessons be repeated, and the appropriate sequence and content of instruction will be disrupted for some members of the group. And while these authors cite the heavy dropout rate and pressure to keep enrollment figures high as reasons for allowing the "enter anytime" policy, it can also be argued that conversely, the frustration experienced by learners as a result of this procedure may cause dropout for some.

Another problem that occurs when instruction is provided to learners in large groups is that it can become easy for some individuals to fall behind if they miss class sessions, and to become discouraged. When instruction is truly individualized and students learn in small, informal groups, or are tutored one-on-one, these types of problems can be avoided.

A number of the conventional classroom strategies and the teacher - student relationship it dictates, simply have not proved effective in ABE - in terms of promoting learning or allowing for individual differences in ability, learning styles, interests or objectives, all of which must be acknowledged if learners are to make progress, remain motivated and find value in what they are doing.

Another instructional technique mentioned in some of the literature as associated with dropout in ABE is testing. Testing of learners, both initially and periodically throughout their involvement in an ABE program is a necessary and potentially invaluable practice regardless of the predominant method of instruction. An accurate assessment of the learners' vision and hearing, as well as skills levels and learning styles is essential if instructors are to be effective in helping adults to learn.

However, some researchers and writers in the field believe that testing, especially initial testing, can cause dropout. According to Mezirow et al.,

> "A point of highest threat potential is testing. ABE students. . . come to class with such diminished self images that any small reversal can evoke echoes of a dozen other humiliations. . . The problem is most acute for those coming to class for the first time. The number who leave the program or never really get started because of being tested is unknown but believed by many ABE educators to be very high" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 32).

There is a lack of research data to provide evidence of the relationship between testing procedures and dropout/persistence behaviors. However, on the basis of what we know about the self confidence levels of many illiterated adults, and the anxiety producing effects of testing in general, it is not unreasonable to assume that for some individuals, testing is unpleasant enough to cause dropout.

To prevent this from occuring, some authors ←——— recommend that initial testing be delayed

allowing time for learners to get acquainted with the instructor or tutor, and to become more at ease with the instructional environment.

The negative impact associated with testing in ABE can also be mitigated by following the guidelines that are relevant to the use of testing in any situation. ABE personnel should convey the purpose of any test given and administer the test in the most comforable, relaxed setting possible. Testing should not be done unless the results will be used constructively, and provide information about learners that is clearly related to the objectives of the program. It is also important to provide learners with feedback about the results of a test. Administered carefully and prudently, testing should not represent a significant threat to persistence.

While this brief discussion of some of the methods and techniques that seem to be related to dropout/persistence in ABE has been far from comprehensive, it was intended to illustrate that there is a need for program administrators and instructors to reevaluate some of the conventional classroom approaches to instruction, which have not been effective in addressing individual learning styles or needs, and which have not proved successful in encouraging persistence. There is a need to formulate alternative strategies for helping individuals learn literacy skills, and further research is needed to determine the extent to which different approaches are

effective in terms of both learning outcomes and learner persistence.

Course relevancy - Many researchers and writers in adult education have emphasized that adults are most motivated to learn when they perceive the content of a course as directly applicable to some important aspect of their lives. It has also been theorized (by Hogheim and Rubenson, see pp. 9-11) that adults will tend to persist in learning activities when they perceive that doing so will be advantageous to attaining important personal goals - in other words, when the course content is perceived as relevant.

In his review of the research on dropout in adult education, Darkenwald concludes: "The extent to which a course or other organized learning activity is relevant to, or congruent with, student needs and objectives is probably the major determinant of persistence" (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 7).

As discussed earlier in this paper, adults seek literacy skills for a variety of practical reasons, such as the desire to get a better job, get a driver's license, or help their children in school. These adults are usually motivated by the perception that becoming literate will help them solve immediate problems, and more effectively carry out crucial roles and responsibities.

Yet typically, the content of instruction in ABE has been decided by everyone but the learners, and often curricula

have not encompassed the concerns that are especially relevant to learners. As Fingeret states,

> "Individually oriented programs traditionally have focused on teaching the basic skills of reading, writing, and computing, embedding the skills in content that has been chosen by instructors, administrators, or textbook publishers on the basis of its presumed relevance to students" (Fingeret, 1984, p. 29).

In their survey of 1,900 ABE teachers nationwide, Mezirow et al. found that almost all teachers reported placing great emphasis on reading, language skills and arithmetic, while less than one third of the teachers emphasized health and consumer education, social studies or ethnic heritage; only a slightly higher percentage of teachers emphasized so called coping skills (such as how to apply for a job or obtain legal assistance.) Mezirow et al. concluded, "ABE is heavily oriented toward the traditional 3 R's and other subject areas are given more lip service than real attention" (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 65).

An interesting finding of this study was that black teachers of primarily black classes were considerably more likely than white teachers to emphasize the nontraditional subject areas mentioned above, and also reported lower dropout rates among their students than did white teachers. One of the researchers, in a later publication explains that in the data analysis, when "the teacher's race was controlled by amount of 'nontraditional subject emphasis' it became clear that most of the variation in dropout rates could be accounted

for by subject matter emphasis (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 7). Perhaps because they came from similar backgrounds, the black teachers were more sensitive to the pressing needs and concerns of their students, were responsive in terms of subject matter emphasis, and were more successful in retaining their students.

One of the only research studies that has attempted to examine the relationship between course relevancy and dropout/persistence in ABE was conducted by Garrison (1985). Based on the theory that adults must perceive a curriculum as relevant to their goals if they are to be motivated and persist (which Garrison notes as being consistent with Knowles' assumptions about adults' desire for immediacy of application, and instruction based on relevant problem areas), Garrison hypothesized that two variables of particular interest in the study of dropout in ABE were the effects of course relevancy and goal clarity.

Recognizing the complexity of the dropout problem, Garrison contends that it is crucial for research on these (or any other) variables to be done in concert with other psychosocial variables in the learner's school and nonschool environments. His main research question was whether the goal clarity and course relevancy variables would provide greater discrimination between persisters and dropouts than other psychosocial variables, in an adult high school completion program.

Garrison administered the Differential Aptitude Tests: Verbal Reasoning (Bennett et al., 1972), Classroom Environment Scale: Form S (Trickett and Moss, 1974), Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes and Rahe, 1967), the Adjective Check List (Gough and Heilbrun, 1980), a course relevancy and goal certainty questionnaire, and a subjective rating scale of perceived financial concern, to a sample of 89 ABE learners.

Variables used in his analysis included: course relevancy, goal clarity, DAT (a measure of ability to understand think and reason verbally), SRRS (a measure of recently experienced life changes causing stress), financial concern, involvement (in class activities), affiliation, teacher support, task orientation, competition (for grades and recognition), achievement need, endurance, degerence, self confidence, ideal self, and self control. The preceeding represented independent variables, while the dependent variable of the analysis was persistence/dropout.

To better determine the relative contributions of the variables of interest, demographic variables were included first in the analysis to statistically control for the influence of such background attributes.

An initial anlaysis revealed that dropouts were more certain of their goals and thought their courses were more relevant than did persisters, (contrary to the research

hypothesis.) Dropouts also had lower scholastic ability (as measured by DAT scores), experienced more socioeconomic changes (SRRS), and had higher ideal self scores than persisters (Garrison, 1985, pp. 31-33). So Garrison performed a second analysis to explore some of the possible interaction effects of these variables, and the results revealed that the interaction of scholastic ability and course relevancy added to the discrimination of persisters and dropouts more than course relevancy itself. Interaction with course relevancy, the self confidence and ideal-self discrepancy variables were even more significant discriminators of persisters and dropouts.

Garrison's explanation of these findings was that "students with lower scholastic ability, lower self confidence, and greater socioeconomic change may set unrealistic goals for themselves and have unrealistic expectations of the program resulting in an incongruence leading to dropout" (Garrison, 1985, p. 36).

Affiliation was also shown to be significant as a discriminator between dropouts and persisters, suggesting that social integration is associated with persistence. Garrison sees this integration as needing to occur between the school and the individual, and contends that there is a strong need for schools to make greater attempts to integrate themselves with the lives of students. He further explains that the

influence of the social integration variable also "suggested that social groups external to the school environment may exert a much stronger influence regarding persistence/dropout in ABE" (Garrison, 1985, p. 36).

The findings of this research seem supportive of Boshier's congruence theory, in that they provide evidence that incongruities within the learner (intra-self), and between the learner and key aspects of the environment, including people (self/other), are related to dropout. The need for social integration suggested by the results of Garrison's study also appear to support the theorization of Hogheim and Rubenson, who emphasize the influence of membership or reference groups in shaping the attitudes of learners toward an educational activity.

The results of Garrison's study do not discount the significance of course relevancy as a variable influencing dropout/persistence, but instead provides evidence that the impact of this factor is best understood by taking into account its interaction with other variables. The findings suggest that course relevance alone is not a determinant of persistence; rather it appears that in combination, scholastic ability, self confidence, a sense of social affiliation, and course relevancy are associated with persistence in ABE; lack of socioeconomic stability and unrealistic expectations seem to be associated with dropout.

Garrison's research is noteworthy because it is one of

the few that have attempted to examine a number of independent interaction variables simultaneously, and which has recognized and addressed the complexity of dropout and persistence behavior.

CONCLUSION

A great deal of the research on dropout and persistence in ABE has focused on classifying who is dropout prone, particularly in terms of sociodemographic attributes, but has failed to probe the reasons why learners drop out or to address how dropout can be prevented. Consequently, these findings have been of limited usefulness.

Sociodemographic studies and some of the research on psychological factors associated with dropout/persistence seem to reflect the assumption that dropouts and persisters can be characterized by certain concrete, isolatable attributes, the designation of which suggests that the dropout problem stems primarily from the learners - a view that may be seen as consistent with the deficiency perspective of ABE learners prevalent in the literature over the years. In other words, researchers typically seem to approach the problem by trying to discover what is wrong with adult literacy students that they drop out.

Certainly research on those variables most closely associated with the individual (for example, intelligence, locus of control, self confidence and motivations for learning), has produced a substantial amount of information essential to formulating an understanding of why learners drop out or persist; and further research on these factors could provide further insights of great value to ABE practitioners.

However, many studies have failed to take into account the many situational variables, external to learners, which also influence their behavior. While situational factors contributing to dropout are widely acknowledged in the literature, their significance has been underemphasized. And although some of the common situational deterrants to persistence cannot be resolved by educators, others which are typically viewed as solely the problem of the learners, can be effectively addressed by ABE programs. The tendency to minimize the significance of situational variables, and to view them as simply beyond the control of ABE programs, seems to further reflect the belief that high dropout rates must stem from the failure of students rather than weaknesses in program structure or services.

According to Darkenwald, "Dropout research suggests that the most important variables in accounting for dropout from adult education are those over which the teacher has the most control, i.e. teaching - learning variables" (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 15). As such these variables are also especially significant in terms of implications for preventing dropout. Yet research efforts have been probably most deficient in the area of program context variables, including those directly associated with the teaching - learning process.

Notably, very little research has attempted to illuminate the relationship between instructional strategies and dropout/persistence in ABE. Perhaps more importantly, there is a lack

of research examining the relationship between instructional strategies or learning modes and actual learning outcomes. The primary objective of ABE administrators and instructors should be to make sure that students learn what they need to learn. It should be recognized that persistence is not necessarily synonomous with learning, as it is not uncommon for adults to remain involved in ABE programs for a number of years, even though they have made no significant learning progress.

Therefore, both researchers and practitioners need to be asking not only how they can encourage persistence, but how they can effectively cause learning to take place. More emphasis needs to be placed upon determining what learning mode works best for individual learners, and sharing information among practitioners about how various strategies have correlated with learning gains and dropout/persistence behaviors.

For the most part, research on dropout and persistence in ABE has attempted to examine specific variables in isolation, often ignoring the interaction of a given factor with other related factors. Recognizing the complexity of the dropout problem, and the fact that dropout/persistence seems to occur as the result of the interaction of many variables in the learners' school and nonschool environments, there is a need for more studies that analyze a number of interaction variables simultaneously.

Because the teaching - learning process is dynamic, fluid and evolving, and because characteristics of the teaching - learning experience are closely interrelated and sometimes hard to separate, it is often difficult to assess the process through scientific investigations requiring the isolation and control of selected variables. More ethnographic research, which involves the observation of variables in their natural setting, is also needed to further our understanding of how teaching - learning factors influence dropout/persistence behaviors.

In reviewing the research and related literature on dropout and persistence, several other weaknesses were noticed. First, it appears that conclusions about these behaviors are often based upon the opinions of instructors and administrators, but the perspectives of ABE learners are ignored. A balanced view of why people leave programs cannot be formulated by surveying only educators, who may be reticent to acknowledge their own weaknesses or those of their programs, or who may simply be unaware of the many psychological, situational or program context variables influencing persistence.

Another problem with the literature on dropout in ABE is that, while a number of writers have made recommendations as to how ABE programs could operate more effectively, often these conclusions have not been based on actual research findings. Results from studies that have explored the impact of various program delivery approaches, counseling services, or

instructional techniques would provide badly needed guidance for practitioners.

On the basis of the research and related literature on dropout and persistence in ABE, and adult education in general, a number of conclusions have been drawn and implications for practice presented throughout this paper. To summarize, the following generalizations about existing programs and how persistence among learners can be promoted can be made:

1. There seems to be a need for a more comprehensive orientation process for learners at the beginning of thier involvement in ABE programs than is commonly conducted. Instructors need to accurately assess learners' ability, self confidence levels, preferred learning styles, motives for participation, and learning interests.

Learners need to be helped to formulate realistic, meaningful objectives, and know what to expect from their involvement in a program. More thorough orientation procedures could provide instructors with a more adequate foundation for helping students learn and persist; and could promote greater consistency between what learners expect and desire, and what they actually derive from participating in a program.

2. Stronger efforts need to be made to eliminate or at least minimize situational factors that negatively affect learner persistence. While some of these factors (such as moving away, poor health or bad weather) are beyond the

control of ABE programs, others (such as mobility and child care problems) can be mitigated by modifying program structure and practices.

3. There is a need for ABE programs to implement alternative approaches to delivering their services, perhaps most notably to be willing to provide learning opportunities in locations other than school classrooms. Utilization of the home tutoring approach seems to offer especially promising potential for encouraging participation and persistence. In general, ABE programs need to provide learning resources and activities in ways that fit the students, rather than expecting students to fit existing programs.

4. With respect to the teaching - learning process, it appears that the significance of instructor qualifications has been underemphasized and there is reason to believe that both learning gains and persistence may be negatively affected when important instructor competencies are lacking. More careful selection and evaluation of ABE instructors, and greater incentives and opportunities for instructors to improve their competencies could help to alleviate instructor deficiencies.

There is much evidence to suggest that learners are more motivated to learn and more likely to persist when the content of instruction addresses real and important personal needs, and when the individual is allowed to dictate the order and pace of desired content rather than asked to follow a prescribed curriculum deemed relevant by an administrator,

instructor or materials writer. Short term goals of students should be legitimized and instruction geared to meet these goals. Instructors need to carefully monitor students' learning progress and provide continuous feedback and encouragement to learners.

5. Research has shown that typically much more energy and effort are devoted to recruitment than to retention, and very little emphasis is placed on following up on those who drop out of ABE programs (Mezirow, 1975, p. 134). More adequate follow-up on dropouts by practitioners could help to resolve problems students might be having, and research based on follow-up efforts could provide valuable insights as to why students drop out and how programs might be altered to prevent dropout.

Understanding the variables associated with dropout in ABE and striving to modify programs so that obstacles to persistence are eliminated not only increases the likelihood of enabling individuals to realize their fullest potential as learners; dedication to the provision of high quality, effective educational opportunities for illiterate adults is also a very powerful and public acknowledgement of the inherent worth, ability and potential of illiterate adults.

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